



Buchczyk, M. (2015). To Weave Or Not To Weave: Vernacular Textiles and Historical Change in Romania. *Textile*, 12(3), 328-345 .  
<https://doi.org/10.2752/175183514X14156359536980>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.2752/175183514X14156359536980](https://doi.org/10.2752/175183514X14156359536980)

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**Magdalena Buchczyk**

**Goldsmiths College**

an602mb@gold.ac.uk

**To weave or not to weave: vernacular textiles and historical  
change in Romania**

**Introduction**

In central rural Romania, weaving skills were a key part of everyday life, transmitted and circulated among women and creating a sense of local identity and individual mastery through shared values of textile production. Recently, however, this complex craft knowledge has been called into question. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among the last generation of craft practitioners, this paper explores how conversations about craft production and its decline can uncover the unexplored local meanings of textiles. Weaving in flux is interlinked with the tumultuous history of postwar Romania. By tracing stories of craft techniques in the source community, it is argued that dialogue about the decorative fabrics, currently found in museums, provides insights about the everyday context of historical transformation, social change, and subjectivities immersed in these complex processes.

**The setting**

Vistea is a village located in central Romania between the foothills of the Fagaras Mountains and the banks of the Olt River in Brasov County. First attested in 1511 as a part of property belonging to the Romanian nobility along with Fagaras Land, it is situated in the historical borderland between the principalities of Transylvania (north) and Wallachia (south). Between 1688 and 1867, the region fell under the Austro-Habsburg Empire, followed by Hungarian landowners until after World War I, when

it became part of the newly formed Greater Romania. Shifting historical circumstances, the policies of foreign powers controlling the region, the demographic situation in the countryside and peasant land distribution customs led to underdevelopment of the region in the post-feudal period (Kideckel 1993, 35). After the incorporation to Greater Romania, facing the aforementioned factors, the interwar economic crisis and policies of the Romanian state, the region became a site of migration, mostly to the United States and southern parts of Romania (idem, 39). According to the village monograph,<sup>1</sup> this phenomenon was due to a combination of economic hardships, partition of the property related to population growth, avoidance of military service, the availability of passports and bank loans and the local notion of the American dream. The Second World War period had profound impact on the village life, due to military mobilization and the construction of a German arms plant in Ucea, the neighbouring hamlet. As World War II ended, following the installation of state socialism and the Romanian People's Republic in 1947, the area was influenced by the reforms of the newly established planned economy. Firstly, Vistea became subject to policies of agrarian reform. In the 1950s Romania, the 'peasant question' was to be solved by land collectivization and class war in the countryside, through the elimination of 'chiaburi', Romanian equivalent to kulaks in the Soviet Union (Kligman and Verdery 2011, Dobrinu and Iordachi 2009). Across Romania, this policy led to local protests and repressions of peasants, in Vistea it resulted in the establishment of the Fagaras guerrilla movement. Participants of this spontaneous protest were imprisoned or sent to labour camps on the Danube- Black Sea Canal, a Stalinist-style construction project (Brisca and Ciuceanu 2007, Catanus and Roske, 2004). Finally in 1962, all villagers of Vistea signed up to the collective, marking the

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<sup>1</sup> Please explain!

establishment of the “Moldoveanu” state farm (hereafter CAP). The CAP introduced mechanized farming and new division of labour grouping the new peasant workers into teams, brigades and sections according to residency criteria. According to the respondents, every team, organised by street, was required to fulfil a daily quota on the state farm. Secondly, the socialist development project of Victoria, Fagaras and other local towns transformed this profoundly agricultural region into a centre of heavy industry, based on the burgeoning chemical sector. Five-Year Plans, focused on accelerated development of heavy industry and nationalization, were implemented in Ucea, transforming the factory into a chemical plant (*combinatul chimic*), a part of Sovromchim, a system of Romanian–Soviet joint economic enterprises. The industrial drive of Stalinist plans resulted in the influx of workforce in the area and semi-urbanization of the countryside. In 1949, the worker’s colony, locally called Red Ucea, was developed into an emblematic socialist town, from 1954 named Victory of Communism. As in many parts of Romania, the process of rural industrial development had an effect on the villagers’ relationship with the city, creating ‘weekend peasants’ working in factories, a new class of agricultural proletariat (Cartwright 2001, 62). Peasant workers of Vistea found employment in the nearby chemical plant and often received training through the secondary school in the town of Victoria. Some villagers moved to the rapidly industrializing cities across Romania. After the 1989 revolution, the state farm was dissolved under de-collectivisation policy and the Victoria chemical plant underwent privatization. Contemporary Vistea represents a rich mosaic of small-scale farmers and entrepreneurs with a tendency for migration to other European Union countries, mostly Spain, Italy or Austria

### The art of making: From the field to the loom



Figure: *Peretar* wall hanging from the 1957 Horniman Museum collection (left)



Figure: *Chindeu* wall hanging, Horniman Museum collection (right)

In the 1950s, when a collection of folk art was assembled for the Horniman Museum in London, textile production was a significant part of the cottage industry. The following responses of the craftswomen to the images of a museum collection acquired in Vistea provide insights about techniques, patterns, lines and shapes of textiles, revealing the local perspectives on cloth and historical change. At the point of collection in 1954, all fabrics were made by women within the household, ranging from objects of daily use (clothes, bags for storing agricultural produce and for carrying food to the field, as well as towels, blankets) and decorative textiles for interior decoration. Textiles were produced in the cycle of the year, from raw material to the decorative parts of the weaving process. Hemp and flax were commonly grown in the village and processed mechanically for fibre from raw material to the final piece. Firstly, plants yielding vegetal fibres were planted, grown, weeded and collected from the fields. The next step was to beat the outer fibres with special wooden tools (*meIiță*) and card them with various sizes of heckling combs (*raghilă*). This phase involved repetitive action of breaking, scotching, separating the fibres from wood and straw, removing the resin and smoothening them to reach the right quality of the material for spinning. In hand spinning, the craftswoman would draw

out fibres from a stick and twist them in one direction between two fingers. Spinning was an opportunity for social gatherings; women met in the evenings for late night sittings (*sezatoare*) in one of the houses to gossip and meet neighbours. On occasions, there were mutual help sittings (*claca*) of group labour for women in need. The *sezatoare* evenings were social events expressing relatedness, communal work and providing space for relationships. Mama Live recalled the pleasant atmosphere of the sittings with hours of singing, gossiping, dancing, story-telling, courting and joking. The social role of these nocturnal sittings was key to the everyday life of the village, reflecting well-described case of early modern spinning bees in Germany and their entanglements of idioms of custom, work, kinship and sexuality (Medick 1984).

Growing up in Vistea included experiencing various learning environments within the family and neighbourhood, as children were engaged in specific phases of yarn preparation, spinning or weaving was part of daily tasks. My Vistea respondents recalled that as children they were constantly exposed to the rhythmical sound of weaving, as their mothers would often weave in candlelight throughout the night. For Mr Lupu, the memory of his mother strongly connoted the powerful noise of weaving at night, the shape of her shadow at the loom as he was lying in bed, trying to fall asleep. Techniques of hemp, flax and wool yarn preparation, spinning and weaving were taught in the domestic environment, transmitted from the older generation of women, by means of observation and hands-on learning. Fabrics were exclusively made by hand and most women were expected to have familiarized themselves with the whole cycle of textile processing by the end of the schooling period, around the age of fourteen. Some girls would be taken out of school to work in the household, as

Mama Tave remembered, *at the age of eleven, I left school to do that; this is my only profession. (meserie).*

The loom was made at home or by the village joiner and set up throughout the winter period. Smaller parts, such as wooden shuttles (*suveici*)<sup>2</sup> and reeds<sup>3</sup> (*vatala*) could be purchased in the local town market or from traders periodically visiting the village. Proper preparation and warping of the loom was the key to success and involved precise knowledge of the size and materials used for the piece to be woven. Weaving in two heddles was suitable for most wall hangings, shirts and aprons; the closer weave of four heddles was mostly used to make blankets (*tol*), trousers and coats. Patterns and decorative motifs were handpicked in the loom (*alesătură*) with two techniques, by weaving over (*printre fire*) or through the thread (*peste fire*).



Figure: Picking patterns through the thread, Horniman Museum collection archive, 1957 (left)

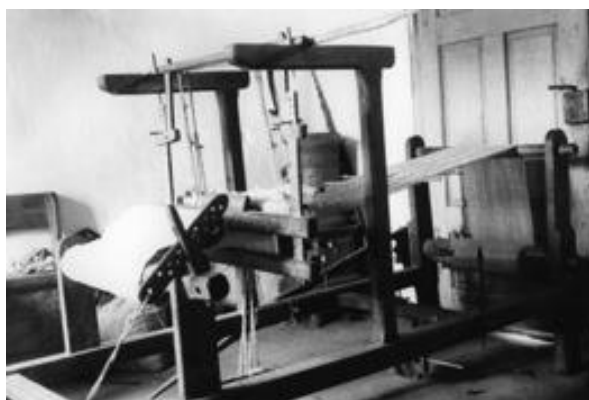


Figure: Horizontal loom, 1957 Horniman Museum collection archive (right)

Weaving was the main domestic activity during the winter period and as remembered by the Vistea respondents, women would often work on fabrics, combined with cooking and childcare. While ‘resting’, Mama Tave would work on the loom a little or stitch together pieces of wall hanging or a woven bag to be used in the field. There was always work and it was considered inappropriate just to sit, doing nothing. A

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<sup>2</sup> Shuttles are used for drawing the weft (*băteală*) yarn across the loom and reeds

<sup>3</sup> Combs push the threads into place during weaving

good household involved a constant rhythm of activities in the cottage and the field, food preparation and the making and repairing articles of quotidian use.

Memories of Vistea women of processing yarn and making cloth illustrate the considerable burden of labour and high skill level required for the production of textile objects. These household tasks were integrated into a wider context of women's responsibilities, constituted the tempo of daily and the seasonal cycles and symbolized local knowledge and experience linked to a particular type of livelihood and community of practice.

#### Designs, creativity and local style

The following section discusses the narratives on making and assessing decorative patterns in cloth production in Vistea. It focuses on communicated and expressed forms of embodied knowledge, local notions of creativity and technical innovation. During my ethnographic fieldwork in Vistea in 2012, discussing images of the museum collection and their counterparts in the village I learnt that the museum models were perceived as belonging to the old generation (*batranesti*). Most women, critical of the pieces made by their mothers and grandmothers, similar to the Horniman Museum artefacts, explained how their generation invented more sophisticated patterns. The detailed designs they found more aesthetically pleasing were intricately woven lines of ornamental shapes in wide regular sections, symmetrically arranged and more pronounced in colour and graphic detail.

In the case of the old pieces, the patterns were collectively referred to as simple flowers (*florile*), from the Vistea craftswomen's point of view, as they were taking similar objects out of their chests and cupboards for comparison. The new patterns were referred to in mathematical and representational terms (circles, rhomboids, birds,



eyes). While we inspected the photographs and various pieces kept at Vistea homes, it became clear that although the patterns were not village-based, there was an awareness of the different types of decorative schemes in the area. Rather than folk patterns linked to ‘ethnographic zones’, the identity of the ornamental schemes was flexible, reappearing in various locations in the area through the relationships of the practitioners.



Figure: Mama Codrea presenting her collection of *old pieces*, 2012 (left)



Figure: Mama Tave presenting pieces made with new floral patterns, Vistea, 2012 (right and bottom)

The newer style of my octogenarian respondents was linked to new materials and chemical dyes that brought space for chromatic improvements. In the 1950s and 1960s, women from Vistea began to purchase cotton from the cooperative shop in the city of Victoria. Cotton was a stronger material, allowing them to produce sophisticated fabrics made with homemade hemp or wool weft combined with commercial cotton warp. Gradually, handpicked designs were replaced by patterns made with the shed rod technique, an innovation resulting in the creation of more complex and symmetrical ornamentation. From the craftswomen’s perspective, this new opportunity allowed them to develop more sophisticated sequences, focus on decorative skills and thus transgress the abilities of their mothers and grandmothers,

who were viewed as overworked, occupied by the preparation of yarn and only capable of making *simple designs*.

The conversations about the historical dynamics of decorative models and weaving techniques reveal the craftswomen's views on innovation and technical choice in textile production. Their perceptions present an alternative logic to the curatorial view of folk textiles where patterns are understood as repositories of cultural heritage or the aesthetics of the local style and the *ethnographic zone*. The museum curators I spoke to saw the newer forms of production as kitsch and a contamination of authenticity. Although Romanian museological and ethnographic scholarship produced a rich body of knowledge about local designs and ornamental typologies, any technical innovation outside these categories is often overlooked or conceptualized as a threat to the traditional character of crafts or regional identity. The craftswomen's views on objects contrasted against curatorial praise of the *pure, authentic and traditional*. The weavers operated in a dialogical relationship with the received forms of craftsmanship. In this context, fabric designs were a continuous interplay of technical choices, creativity and experiential proficiency. Stylistic innovations connoted a sense of experimentation, technical pride, personal evaluation and superior status of the craftsperson. Interpreting the old textiles, such as those from the Horniman Museum collection, they emphasized that they constituted a starting point, rather than a fixed repertoire of traditional models to be reproduced in cross-generational craft transmission. They constructed a local understanding of heritage and identity through continuing practice but also in technical choices, creative forms of engagement with materials, techniques and aesthetic categories of patterns. Their view on heritage was

one of dynamic cultural production deeply situated in both the present and in the past (Kirshenblatt – Gimblett 1995)

#### Producing red folk art: Cottage industry and socialism

Folk art has typically been viewed as static emblematic heritage produced in the Romanian village, marking a fixed notion of peasant heritage. This section concerns the respondents' interpretation of folk art and related narratives on the experience of labour. From the local perspective, folk art was a type of production nested in a particular moment in time. Textile-work in the socialist period, underrepresented by museum ethnographers, presents how the historical transformations in the area reframed making and experience of material culture.

The Central Union of Handicraft Cooperatives (hereafter UCECOM), established in 1951, was a central body to set up and control handicraft cooperation. Resulting from the Decision of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party of 1953 on the perfecting of the handicraft activity, the Romanian state paid significant attention to folk art and preservation of tradition. Following this, craft production and activities belonging to cottage industries became appropriated by an ever-growing system of cooperatives producing “*objects of genuine folk art, new products, turning to account traditional elements and objects of modern decorative art*” (Horsia and Petrescu 1975). Folk art becomes a concern for the state and is being carefully designed and supervised. What used to be small-scale domestic craft, becomes incorporated into the modern project and gains a new role within the socialist economy. As Horsia and Petrescu illustrated, ‘*folk art and the production of artistic handicrafts no longer represent the idyllic concern of sociologists, ethnographers or artists but is an important coordinate of the contemporary environment, a social objective attained*

*within economic life, depending on its efficiency and weight for the national income. (...) Specialty cadres are guiding and controlling the whole activity, with a view to maintaining the genuine character of folk art as well as to turning to account traditional elements for both useful and decorative products. (...)'* (idem, 74). Studies of the relationships between socialist institutions and folklore pointed to the manipulative character of the state, the reification of cultural practices, and the transformation of folk art production for political means (Kligman 1988, Kaneff's 2004, Hertzog, 2010). Folklore was the prime resource for a new socialist culture, therefore, to be sterile and pure, it was to be controlled by the state and produced on command (Zemtsovsky, I., & Kunanbaeva 1997). Under Stalinism, the genuine, authentic and protochronic (Mihailescu 2007, 2008a, 2008b, Popescu 2002) character of folklore included folk art and craft production, and, in similar ways to Polish crafts in the 1950s, artefacts became a *"fetish made of particular and historically specific constructions of 'authentic' working class-culture."* (Crowley, 75). At the same time, originality as resource went hand in hand with socialist modernity and crafts were given new functions, *"the material focal point for a new political identity, which was simultaneously national and socialist by nature"*. (Makovicky, 52). As state bodies, such as UCECOM subdued domestic craft practices into controlled cooperative production, socialist education system, exhibition practices and public performances, objects and craft knowledge travelled outside the countryside, becoming increasingly recontextualized (Kaneff, 2004).

From the late 1960s, around twenty craftswomen in the village made textiles on command in a form of outwork for the Brasov Cooperative. In making folk art, the weavers were drawing on pattern guidelines provided by the commissioning party.

They remembered the regular visits of the “*elegant city women*” bringing materials and exemplary model pieces to be reproduced, collected from households and sold in the state shops around the country. Women who worked as weavers for the cooperative system kept a few textiles produced in that period and presented me with examples of their cooperative work. These objects belonged to a separate category of folk art (*arta populara*) without any connotation of aesthetic value. For the weavers, folk art was different in shape, predominantly “*red and easy to make*”, compared to the pieces produced for the household.



Figure: Mama Live showing the red *folk art* napkin (left) and the *old model* (right), Vistea, 2012 (left)

Figure: Mama Evuta presenting textiles made by her, holding the *folk art piece*. The large blanket and small napkin in the right bottom corner are representative of her own models, Vistea 2012 (right)

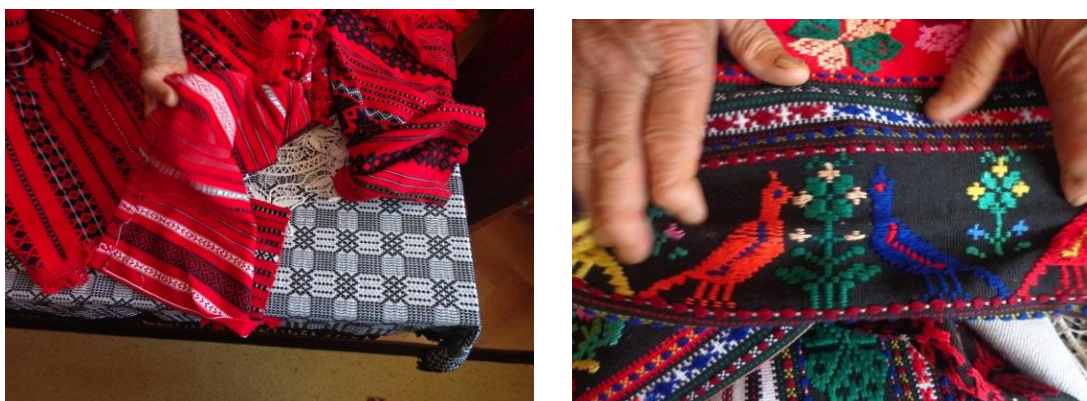


Figure: Mama Tave showing the *folk art* textile of her production, Vistea 2012 (left)

Figure: In contrast to the valueless folk art, new style made with complex bird design was a source of Mama Tave’s pride in workmanship, Vistea, 2012 (right)

Craftwork for the cooperative, my respondents argued, was mainly a form of extra income and a way to reach the minimum number of years of work to reach the full state pension. In addition, economizing with materials provided by the cooperative allowed the weavers to make additional pieces on the side for own use or for sale in the village. Mama Tave, Mama Live and Mama Codrea were one of the most active folk art producers in the village, working on the commissions of UCECOM and often producing additional pieces to sell to other women in Vistea. Those working in heavy industry or socialist administration became the new customers of the weavers. As women's lives gradually became modernized through the incorporation into the state-run labour force, they did not have disposable time for craft production. Handmade textiles that once were part of the family legacy and marker of the household became the occupation of the small group of makers operating in the second economy.

A number of respondents recalled the socialist period through memories of speculation about crafts, emphasizing that the work at the collective farm provided the residents of Vistea with an opportunity to take away food from the collective farm (CAP) and exchange it for various goods, decorative textiles, embroideries, traditional dress sold from the makers' homes or in the area of the chemical plant. Sales were organized by word of mouth, using family networks, neighbourhood or contacts in Victoria. The clientele of the plant would also buy eggs, homemade spirits or vegetables grown in the back garden, creating stable informal economy networks which became a regular part of life in socialism. These informal practices constituted a wide range of interlinked activities of work, trade and networking. Mama Tave was employed at the collective farm (CAP) but rather than focusing on "*fulfilling her*

*quota of hours*” at the farm, she prioritized folk art and the labour of second economy from the production of milk, plum brandy (*tuica*), vegetables in her garden to baking and cooking at village weddings. Stealing from the CAP or avoiding work in the farm was made invisible by a system of favours between the peasants and administrators of the state farm. Understanding craftsmanship and craft labour under socialism within in this period requires the acknowledgment of this complex spectrum of informal activities. Studies of Soviet Russia and socialist Europe well document various patterns of patronage networks and second economies (Fitzpatrick 1999, Firlit and Chlopecki 1992, Ledeneva 1998, Verdery 1996). Under socialism, these forms of ordinary practice allowed adaptation to the imposed conditions and ‘muddling through’ the complex ideologically saturated landscape of daily life (Heintz 2006, 88). Production for commercial purposes on private plots, theft from the farm and other black market transactions common among Romanian peasants, were built into the socialist economy of shortage and resulted in politicized consumption practices. Skills in creating networks of favours, through obtaining goods and “*objects became a way of constituting selfhood*”, key to the identity resulting from the structures of the state economy (Verdery 1996, 27). David Kideckel in his ethnography of the Fagaras land under Ceausescu observed that domestic and second economy practices created village-wide reciprocity and affected gender roles across the region. Collectivisation transformed labour and created new models of household and workmanship. Under socialism, women were to play a threefold role: as the main labour force of collective farming, in child rearing and in performing household tasks (Kideckel, 65). As men became the new peasant workers of growing socialist heavy industry, agriculture was increasingly feminized.<sup>4</sup> Gradually, the rural population left agriculture for factories,

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<sup>4</sup> In 1973, only 16.7 per cent of Romanian women worked in the industry.

continuing to live in the village (idem, 91). This model of peasant-worker household was common in Vistea since the 1950s; the villagers could easily reach the city of Victoria and plants around the city of Fagaras by bus. The new position of women was a source of growth of their power in the second economy, community and within the household. They acted as producers for state cooperatives and private plots, had access to knowledge of networks and goods, and increased their control of informal practices. (idem, 127). Such was the case of Vistea weavers, gaining local respect and a privileged position by producing craft objects and circulating them along with agricultural goods and services across local networks in the village and Victoria.

The case of Vistea textile production under socialism unravels the local mechanisms of recontextualization of domestic crafts. Textile objects made for UCECOM were treated by the weavers as a separate class of artefacts, exclusively referred to as *folk art or red things*, artefacts of low value, not perceived as part of the local composition of useful interior decoration. Crafts produced for the state reflected the actually existing work ethics of socialism, as Monica Heintz points out, where the ideological idiom of work is often questioned in daily performance and “*the socialist work ethic (...) in practice takes on a mechanical form: it is asserted but not believed* (Heintz 2006, 95). In Vistea, this attitude applied to state-commissioned craftwork where red socialist folk art was made promptly, with minimum material input. Using their technical skills, weavers minimised the use of thread for UCECOM pieces and extracted this raw material for their own pieces, often sold in the second economy through kin networks or word-of-mouth advertising in the local area. In this sense, UCECOM craft products were perceived as valueless and used to navigate through by



obtaining material ‘on the side’ and small-scale sales of the fabrics made from ‘red piece’ leftovers.

The notional value of textiles was strongly embedded in the technique and use of the artefacts. The weavers represented contrasting views to categories of folk art scholarship, as the *pure authentic* fabrics of their ancestors were conceptualized as technically weak and lacking creativity. Interestingly, both the historical models and state-based designs were perceived as sub-standard work. Since the late 1950s, there was a shift in craft production from domestic purposes to the socialist markets (state sector and second economy) and increasingly woven textiles were circulated outside the house. They were transformed into a new type of valuables, commodities and gifts used in transactions with the state and within local informal practices. Folk art textiles were produced predominantly mechanically with minimum material and labour, on the premise that remaining thread could be to used in personal commissions for the local second economy. These “private pieces” were of high value and complexity, and required the new shed rod technique, modern dyes and cotton thread.

#### **Marginalization of crafts, materiality and the self**

In this section, I trace the values invested in artefacts and related craft activities through the shifting understandings of the social personae generated in textile production. The belief that ‘an industrious woman runs the house with the spindle’ (*Femeia harnică ține casa cu fusul*) was a moral idiom that was key to my interactions with Vistea weavers. When showing photographs of the Horniman Collection, the standard reaction of Vistea women was to turn the image over to check

the name of the maker, to trace the person back to the right household<sup>5</sup> and then tell stories about her family and work. Being hardworking was the predominant normative category of social respect and self-identity of the Vistean. That construction of identity was present throughout, from the level of individual, household to the wider community and place. This cultural ideal was noted in David Kideckel's ethnography of the region in Vistea is situated as Olt Landers self-labeled as hard-workers and labour was elevated to a key symbol in this region (Kideckel 1993). The phrase "industrious woman" (*femeia harnica*) was widely used as a normative characteristic through which women constituted others. Through language distinguishing hard work from idleness, my respondents expressed their constructions of ideal femininity and craft practice. Echoing Kligman and Verdery's note on pre-socialist Romania, the embeddedness in networks and possessions along with industriousness were the pivotal and desirable traits of rural personhood key to self-respect and good name within the community (Kligman and Verdery 2011, 99) *To be a person, then, in pre-communist times was to be deeply embedded in social relations, to own things of value, and to work hard, controlling one's work process; this meant exercising agency and initiative, through autonomous self-direction.* (idem, 101).

According to the DEX Dictionary, in various contexts *harnica* can denote the following traits: "active, hardworking, tireless, indefatigable, industrious, diligent, worthy, zealous, laborious (rare) worker, ascetic, zealous, sleepless, good, capable, competent, prepared, equipped, experienced, tested, trained, skilled, valuable, worthy." Looking through the range of synonyms within this definition, there are ambivalent categories present, a continuous spectrum ranging from ideas of valuable

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<sup>5</sup> There was a practical difficulty in discussing the donors of the objects. Firstly, there are limited numbers of family names in the village. Secondly, most women are known by their local pseudonyms rather than names. One of the typical examples was the name of Paraschiva Vulcan who was only known as Mama Chive.

skills to repetitive toll. These normative ambivalences appeared in my notes on the narratives on the 1957 collection photographs, old Vistea houses and people making and displaying these objects:

<i>Positive characteristics</i>	<i>Negative aspects</i>
<i>Value of complex labour</i>	<i>Uncivilized period</i>
<i>Hardworking individual</i>	<i>Hard times</i>
<i>Good household</i>	<i>Women – only one job (meserie)</i>
<i>Pleasure, ideas, creativity</i>	<i>Unnecessary toll</i>
<i>Achievement – objects were made with own hand, overcoming scarcity</i>	<i>Waste of time - Objects were made for moths</i>
<i>Wealth (dowry etc.)</i>	

Research Diary Entry, September 2012

The story of the marginalization of Vistea textiles starts with a tour of one of the last remaining cottages in the village. As we were looking through the rooms with Mama Codrea, while I was praising the intricacies of the pattern in the wall hanging, she smiled and said that the trend of making such complicated and time-consuming objects was madness (*nebunie*). The weavers' tales reflected the lining of these aesthetic arrangements and the dissonant views of the praxeological principles of femininity. For the elderly craftswomen of Vistea, the notion of the hard working past carried negative connotations of madness. For many, this model of livelihood was uncivilized, as “*people did not realize that things could be done differently*” and lived in dark ages. This underdevelopment was often presented in language terms of *lack of knowledge* and laborious activities that now seemed a *waste of time*. The practice of making fabrics was related to a very visceral sense of discomfort, stories of hardship

and demanding environment. For the weavers in Vistea, the experience of making fabric was vivid and linked to the embodied hardships of the lengthy processes of soaking in icy water, rotting, beating, combing and the long nights of spinning. Tackling the “materiality” of raw materials (hemp, flax, wool) was recalled as the source of backwardness and the weavers of Vistea had an aversion to the burden of yarn preparation. Mama Tave once said jokingly that if they had known that hemp was a narcotic, they would have used its qualities for objects of better quality and less difficult work. These experience of work as constant toll and limited opportunities were contrasted with the life they wanted for their children, modern, advanced and comfortable. Transformation of materials was the source of these improvements. Under socialism, hemp was made illegal and state farms started to cultivate cotton. Moreover, cooperative shops in Vistea and Victoria started to introduce textile consumables, selling cotton yarn, dyes and cloth. The discovery of the properties of cotton and possibility of using industrially produced thread changed their livelihood and notions of craftsmanship.

The tale of the transition of demands and material world was linked to the narrative on modernity, comfort and valuation of material culture. The rejection of craftsmanship was a technical choice (Lemmonier 1993), related to the visceral materiality of the fibres and for the weavers, new materials (cotton or synthetic thread) were metaphors of emancipation. The material legacies of the socialist transition had a significant effect on everyday practice and constructions of personhood. The introduction of readymade materials and tools reconstructed patterns of daily practice, learning environments and value system linked to the shaping of material environment. As craftsmanship and unsettling fibres declined, the normative

indicators of the local material morality of *femeia harnica* were maintained outside the craft contexts, predominantly in the emerging practices of informal economy and new forms of work in the chemical plant or the collective farm. As discussed in the previous section, during the socialist period, ideals of industrious womanhood shifted to new types of activities of the successful performance in the second economy, skills in gaining access to scarce resources and maximizing profits from farming in the private plots or making fabrics for sale through recycling the thread from the UCECOM supplies. This was an ideal of a new feminine refinement, virtuosity, subversive tactics and social networks allowing the woman to leave the house and arrange her social space in a skilful manner. Shedding the burden of manufacturing and domestically based ideal of femininity, the women acquired a role in a rich spectrum of tasks. Textiles made in Vistea were central for subversive activities of women, giving them power in the new types of transactions and relationships. Objects connoted a spectrum of values ranging from insignificant *simple red pieces* to artefacts made and presented with pride, displayed at home.

#### Conclusion: Source communities and material perspectives on the past

This article argues that the changing practices and values of textiles are located in the narratives of personhood, technical choices and transformed materialities, allowing a historical exploration of an obsolete craftsmanship. The narratives of the weavers shed a light on their adjustment to major historical transformations and material histories with textiles as vehicles of remembering and forgetting, rejecting and removing. In Vistea, as a certain model of household and workmanship were becoming discontinued and devalued, a different type of person manipulated and appropriated new materials to reshape the modernising domestic material culture. The case of textile production showed that material environment is deeply interconnected

with narratives of modernity, embodied morality, ideals of femininity and creative material engagement with social change. Materials are part of social representations relating to social representations of identity, heritage and place-making (Kuechler, 126). To the anthropological novice, the devaluation of handmade cloth and craftsmanship in the village deserved attention. These tales of the decline of crafts paint a picture contrasting with the romanticised notion of rural folk arts to be protected from modernity. The absence of these textile skills in contemporary Vistea serves as a material representation of changing values gone modern. At the same time, this ethnographic encounter illustrates the value of implicating the voice of source communities into the museological process of meaning-making (Brown and Peers 2003, Karp and Lavine 1991, Kreps 2003)

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